A Child's Story of American Literature

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Chapter X. Fenimore Cooper: Toe Treader and Truth Teller.

SOMETIMES you happen not to read a favorite series of stories just in the order in which the series runs. Perhaps you chance to pick up the third book of the series first, and, liking that, you go back to number one in order to learn something of the beginnings of the hero. Sometimes it happens, too, that the author himself has written the books in just that haphazard way. Take, for example, J. Fenimore Cooper's famous Leather Stocking Tales, which carry Natty Bumppo with his long rifle and his unerring eye from boyhood to old age and death. You would naturally suppose that Cooper began by writing "The Deerslayer," and, having finished that, went on to tell more of Natty when he was a few years older in "The Last of the Mohicans"; and then in turn wrote "The Pathfinder," "The Pioneer," and finally "The Prairie." You would also suppose that the books were written one right after another, just like so many chapters in a novel. As a matter of fact, "The Pioneers," the fourth in the series, came first. That was written in 1823, when Fenimore Cooper was 34 years old. Then he wrote two novels having nothing to do with Natty Bumppo, and in 1826 wrote number two of the series, "The Last of the Mohicans." "The Prairie," number five, came next and quickly; but then thirteen years passed before he finished the series, with "The Pathfinder," number three, and then "The Deerslayer," number one. It was almost like writing one long story backwards.

Traveling in America One Hundred Odd Years Ago.

In a previous chapter you have seen something of Washington Irving as a boy in an American city of the eighteenth century. In following the early life of Fenimore Cooper you will learn something of what it meant to be an American boy in the country in the eighteenth century. He was born in Burlington, N. J., September 15, 1789. When he was one year of age he was taken to Cooperstown, N. Y. That does not sound like much of a journey in these days of railways and motor cars. But just stop to think what traveling meant one hundred and thirty odd years ago. For example, there is a little book that tells all about a family that went from New Haven, Conn., to Ohio in 1803, thirteen years after the Cooper family moved from New Jersey to western New York. Take one part of that journey, between New York city and Hackettstown, N. J. Suppose you wanted to make that trip in a motor car to-day. Nine o'clock in the morning would be a good time to start.

After crossing the ferry you would travel over good roads (with some exceptions) along the Hudson County Boulevard, through Newark, Springfield, Morristown, Mendham and Chester. Beyond Long Valley, which before the world war used to be German Valley, there would be a change of gears for the winding climb up Schooley's Mountain and then you could coast down the long descent into Hackettstown in time for an early luncheon.

But it was not so easy for that family of 1803. Just one week was needed for the trip. The night before the start there were reverent prayers offered up asking for divine protection in the perilous crossing of the Hudson River. The second night was spent in Elizabethtown. The third night they reached Chatham, the fourth night Morristown and the fifth night Chester. Three days more, in the course of which the wagon in which they traveled was often mired for hours at a time, were needed for the crossing of Schooley's Mountain, which one hundred and twenty years ago was spelled another way.

It was under conditions a good deal like these that Judge Cooper, Fenimore's father, moved his family, consisting of fifteen persons—Fenimore had eleven brothers and sisters—from Burlington to Cooperstown, which was then a frontier settlement with a wilderness on one side. There Judge Cooper had come into possession of thousands of acres of land, and in the middle of these acres he began the building of a home, which, finished nine years later, became the manor house Otsego Hall, for many years the finest private dwelling in or near the Otsego region of New York.

A Boy in the Wilderness.

Consider the conditions under which the boy Fenimore grew up. All about him there was a wilderness to be conquered. Woodcraft came to him naturally. His daughter Susan wrote of her father's child life: "From the first bow and arrow, kite and ball to later feats in fishing, riding, shooting and skating, all were connected with his highland home. His young imagination was fired by thought of the Indians who only a few years before had been building their fires in these forests and paddling their bark canoes in these lakes. Though the life of the cities was far away echoes of it came to him. From time to time distinguished visitors appeared in Otsego Hall. The Frenchman Talleyrand was one of them. Fenimore's first formal schooling was at the hands of the English rector of St. Peter's Church at Albany, and then he went to Yale College, entering at the age of thirteen. There were three years at Yale and then his father obtained for him an appointment as a midshipman in the United States Navy. That was before there was any academy at Annapolis, and the training consisted of shipping the boy before the mast on a merchantman.

To his boyhood days at Cooperstown we owe the Leather Stocking romance and to his years in the navy the tales that he wrote about the sea. Those were the years from 16 to 22. Then he left the navy because he wanted to get married, and the girl had no wish to be a sailor's bride. Perhaps it was just as well. At any rate, they were very happy. It is related that on the wedding day the young couple spent the time between the ceremony and supper by playing a game of chess. The wedding journey was a trip from Westchester county to Cooperstown in a gig, the husband driving two horses tandem. Then Fenimore settled down to the life of a country gentleman, spending part of the time in Cooperstown and part in Mamaroneck, on the Long Island Sound. Busily occupied in improving his properties, he had as yet no thought of writing. It was not till ten years after his marriage that his first book appeared, and the writing of that was entirely due to chance.

The First Books.

One day he happened to read a very dull English novel, and, putting it aside, he said to his wife that he thought he could write a better one himself. When she laughed at him and challenged him to try he promptly began. Finally he finished "Precaution; or Prevention Is Better Than Cure." It was as dull a story as the English novel that had suggested it. No publisher would accept it, so he brought it out at his own expense, and, like most books published in this way, it was read by very few persons. But, having written one novel, Cooper was bound to write another, and the second time there was a very different story to tell.

In the first book he had made the mistake of trying to write about English life and English society, subjects of which he then knew little or nothing. In the second he chose a hero of his own land and scenes that were immediately about him. If he happened to be in doubt about the cave of Harvey Birch it was a simple matter to order out his gig, take the reins and drive over the roads of what in the years of the Revolutionary War had been the Neutral Ground. It was in 1821, when Cooper was 32 years of age, that "The Spy" was published. It success was immediate; within a few months there was a demand for a second edition; its fame crossed the Atlantic Ocean, first to England and then to the Continent; translations of the story were made into foreign languages, and at last people over here came to realize that the young republic had its first American novelist.

When Cooper Was Hailed Good Fellow.

The title of this chapter is "Fenimore Cooper: Toe Treader and Truth Teller." But the first part of that title means the Cooper of later life. The Cooper of the early years was not at all hard to get along with. For some years after "The Spy" had made him a public character he lived in New York city, and there he found many pleasant cronies. He liked to go into the old City Hotel, where the public dinners for famous visitors to New York were usually held, and into the pleasant tap room known as Winduet's, where the actors gathered in the eighteen twenties of the last century. He had many close friends among the writing men of the day—Fitz-Greene Halleck and Joseph Rodman Drake, and Richard Henry Dana, who wrote "Two Years Before the Mast," and Samuel Woodworth, the author of "The Old Oaken Bucket." Finally Cooper himself founded a club known as the "Bread and Cheese Club." It was so called because if you were a member of the club and a new man came up for membership and you wanted him in, you dropped a bit of bread in the ballot box; whereas, if you wanted him kept out you dropped in a bit of cheese. The "Bread and Cheese" was founded in the City Hotel. Later there was another club, known as the "Lunch, or Cooper's Club." That met every Thursday evening in Washington Hall, which was at the corner of Broadway and Chambers street, just where THE NEW YORK HERALD now stands.

At this period of his life, from 1821 to 1825, Cooper had several different homes in New York. When he first came down from Westchester county he rented a house that was far up Broadway, and on the edge of the town. From there he moved to the fashionable neighborhood of St. John's Church. There, in the house at 3 Beach street, he wrote the first story introducing the intrepid Natty Bumppo, "The Pioneer." Then, a year or so before his departure for Europe, he moved to 345 Greenwich street, and there finished "The Last of the Mohicans."

The Years in Europe.

Then there were seven years in Europe in the course of which Cooper's disposition seemed to change, and he acquired the habit of stepping on other people's toes and the habit of suspecting that other people were trying to step on his. Perhaps if he had stayed at home he would have remained the hail fellow well met of the Bread and Cheese Club, which, by the way, was so dependent on his leadership that it ceased to exist soon after his departure. About Europe he moved with a family of ten persons, including servants, and taking care of a party of that size in foreign lands one hundred years ago was enough to spoil any one's disposition. Then, like many other Americans since his day, he lost his temper because certain Europeans were so ignorant when they tried to talk about life in America, and so stubborn in clinging to wrong ideas. There was a school teacher in Dresden who was surprised to find that the Cooper children were not blacks. In England he had a hot dispute with a scholar of his acquaintance. The Englishman pointed to a dictionary definition of the verb *to gouge*, "to squeeze out a man's eye with the thumb; a cruel practice used by the Bostonians in America." Of course Cooper argued that gouging was not a daily pastime in the best Boston circles, and, of course, the other man informed him that as the definition had been written by an Englishman it must be correct and that therefore Cooper knew nothing whatever of his own country. All of which did not make Cooper any more amiable.

Yet Cooper made some very good friends in Europe, among them Lafayette and Sir Walter Scott. There is an amusing story about the meeting of Scott and Cooper in Paris. Both men had been in France for some time. Scott began:

"Est ce Monsieur Cooper que j'ai l'honneur de voir?"

"Monsieur, je m'appele Cooper."

"Eh bien, donc, je suis Walter Scott."

But then Sir Walter came to himself and laughed. "Well," he said, "here have I been *parleyvooing* to you in a way to surprise you, no doubt, but these Frenchmen have got my tongue so set to their lingo that I have half forgotten my own language." The two became fast friends, and Cooper, whom people had been calling the "American Scott," spoke of himself as a chip from the block of the great romancer, and graciously referred to Sir Walter as "my sovereign."

But besides forming friendships, squabbling with Europeans who misunderstood America, and making occasional remarks that, carried back home, caused people in the United States to abuse him as a bad patriot, Cooper found time for good hard work during the seven years abroad. In these years he wrote "The Prairie," "The Red Rover" and "The Water Witch" and several other tales of less importance. Also he gathered the material for ten volumes of travel that were published after he returned home.

With that homecoming in 1832 began the really irritable years. The first thing after his return the people of New York wanted to give him a public dinner, as they did some years later to Irving and Dickens. That was their way of showing appreciation. But perhaps rather rudely he declined the honor. Then he found a house in Bleecker street and filled it with French furniture and French servants. That, too, displeased many of his countrymen, though really it was none of their business. Finally he began to write very critically about American manners, which

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